

The Keys -- A Short Story

Written by John Silva -- January 2015

Roxbury was one of those expensive, extravagant and definitely upscale communities where -- well, you know what they are like. Not enough time...awash in booze, drugs, drama and way too much money...flooded with betrayal, gossip, lust, pride and -- well, you know.

Roxbury University, although small in size, had a compelling reputation for excellence and high standards. Not surprisingly, every college and department had an absolutely splendid cornucopia of distinguished professors. Each had penned their brilliant PhDs at some of the most prestigious institutions of advanced learning from around the world. Which of course meant -- well, you know.

The fact that Audrey was Roxbury's most stellar and gifted student in and out of the classroom had not escaped her consciousness or that of her peers. Audrey was also aware that she possessed other skills beyond mere academics that could be leveraged to her advantage such as...well...you know. By majoring in Eighteenth Century French literature, she had lifted herself into the highest realms of academia and social life at the school. And in so doing, she had positioned herself as the force behind the most remarkable and extraordinary trip that the school had ever sponsored. She was certain that her endeavors would be remembered long after she and her classmates, future students and even perhaps after the school itself was gone. And, now...today...today was the day. It was her day and her time to shine and to awe everyone around her. Every one of her sensory organs told her that the entire school was impressed and grateful to her for what she had done and totally green with envy.

The extraordinary double decker bus that she personally selected and chartered had arrived. Thus far, it was a singularity. No where else on earth could a coach of such luxury be found. Each passenger had their own mini suite with velvet seats that were individually temperature controlled. In addition, personalized video and audio consoles, a two story elevator, lavish power rooms and four absolutely delightful bistros offering a wide selection of succulent food, delicious wine and luscious desserts awaited each guest. The driver guided the vehicle to where the students were waiting, and he made it kneel down for them so they might board effortlessly. It was almost as if the coach were genuflecting to this privileged and favored group.

The, chrome trimmed, turbocharged, transport roared down the highway. With its mirrored windows and polished stainless steel skin it had the appearance of a bolt of lightning streaking the highway or a meteor rocketing across the countryside. It devoured the miles like a ravenous, half starved animal. And, before the fortunate few participating in this extraordinary adventure realized that the journey had finally begun, they had already arrived at their destination.

The theater was so unusual that even Audrey stopped to examine its strange shapes and mystical forms. The delicious aromas that dripped and oozed down the sides of the fluted minarets and gathered into deep, corbeled pools of glowing colored liquids contrasted with the savory and tasty visions that gushed from the giant flowers and cascaded down upon the huge frogs and salamanders that were feeding on the three inch long blazing fireflies. The mesmerizing sounds tasted of spices and chiles from far away countries, and they produced seductive auras that spewed from the eyes of the gargoyles that freely roamed the grounds.

The enormously tall, vertical marquee of the theater towered over the coach and its passengers. It radiated blinding flashes of light imaging the theater's name or perhaps what was currently being shown or performed. Audrey wasn't sure. The words, if that's what they were, seemed to be written in an ancient script or some unknown language that yet seemed strangely familiar. ENOZ (e-noz) THGILIWT (th-gil-i-wit) EHT (eth). She wondered what it meant.

Inside the theater, there were enormous polished mirrors everywhere with chamfered and beveled edges in frames that glittered like diamonds and stars. Great brilliant, radiant and shining, orbs of gold in varying sizes hung from the tiered ceilings and reflected fantastic shapes, images and designs which embedded their geometries onto and into the mind's eye.

All of the staff wore smart, freshly pressed, red and gold uniforms with polished brass buttons that glowed like fire. The dress and manner of the ushers and even the cleaning crew was surreal...they didn't appear to walk but seemed to float effortlessly. They patiently waited for a kernel of almond dusted kettle corn to fall to the floor or someone needing an escort to their seat or a patron seeking directions to the toilettes. The theater was so clean and so perfect that it looked like they had entered a palace prepared for an emperor or even a God. The ushers had been trained to not only be professional in every facet and aspect of their work, but they were also instructed in the finer points of being kind and gentle as well as helpful and polite to the extreme. All of which added to the unreal, fantastic and eerie ambiance of the theater.

However, instead of enjoying the magnificent and opulent surroundings, Audrey was beginning to take offense at the staff and the building. It was almost as if the building and the staff kept saying "We are better than you." "We are better than you." Didn't they know who she was? It was as if they were mocking her. Of Course, that's what was happening! The theater and the staff were slyly looking down their noses at her. The nerve...how dare they! Everyone and everything was trying to make her feel...well...plain and ordinary.

One of the unique features of the theater which contributed to its exclusivity was that every guest was assigned their own personal usher. Jerry Longmier was the usher that had been assigned to take care of Audrey's needs and wants. He was graciously guiding her, as if she were a queen, down the long aisle to the front row of the theater. However, Audrey wasn't feeling like a queen. Far from it! With every step she took, she could feel anger, resentment and rage boiling up inside her, and

then she felt the sweet release when she began to focus her rank and fetid disposition on Jerry.

Even though Jerry had done his job to perfection, and he had showered her with kindness, sympathy and understanding, Audrey continually demeaned and maligned him. She was ruthless in her efforts to pollute, poison and violate not only his spirit but his mind and soul as well. She wanted to destroy him. The kinder and more thoughtful, sympathetic and considerate he was; the more dreadful and appalling she became. Ire and contempt were now controlling and driving her thoughts and actions.

In a final attempt to placate her, Jerry bent down on one knee and apologized profusely for his inability to please her. But, Audrey was on a roll, and she was feeling very full of herself. She savaged Jerry with a barrage of vicious verbal attacks. And, when she was sure that no one was looking, she even gave him a little accidentally/on purpose kick that knocked him over. She wanted him to know that she was beyond special...she was extraordinary! Didn't he know that it was she who had planned this entire trip?

Very quietly and with poise, Jerry got up and went to the phone and dialed. Audrey watched him carefully. She was a bit surprised at his cool and dispassionate demeanor. Usually, when she treated people this way they tended to be more emotional. It was a short conversation, and Jerry hung up the phone and quietly waited.

Mr. Tanner, the manager of the theater, arrived and politely asked Audrey what was the problem. Now feeling very superior, she railed at Jerry and lied about him. She said he had treated her rudely and with disrespect and that the condition of the theater was appalling and a disgrace.

After patiently waiting for Audrey to run out of words, Mr. Tanner explained to her that she would have to come with him. She demanded to know where he was taking her and why? He explained that she needed to be fitted for her usher's uniform. Her eyes narrowed. What uniform? When Audrey heard that Jerry would no longer be an usher at the theater, and he was free to leave the theater...and that she was going to take his place...and she was going to be an usher...and she was going to have to wear a usher's uniform... well, she went supernova. The air turned blue, then green and then purple. With an every increasing crescendo of malevolence, the torrent of fetid and putrid words that came from deep within her core vomited themselves onto Jerry. Audrey's mouth became a seething, boiling volcano spewing pure hatred.

Mr. Tanner calmly told Audrey that he was disappointed that she did not appreciate the theater and all that Jerry had done for her. But, in spite of everything that she had done and everything that had happened, he told her that he had a special present just for her. This caused Audrey to pause, and she wondered what kind of a gift she might be getting. Quite pleased with her recent performance, which she felt

clearly demonstrated her superior status and position, she felt it would have to be a very special gift...and so it was.

Mr. Tanner's eyes locked with Audrey's, and with grace and dignity he slowly reached into his pocket. And, after a measure of drama along with some pomp and ceremony, he presented Audrey with a ring of well worn keys. Instinctively, she recoiled from the keys. But, Mr. Tanner took her hand and gently but firmly wrapped her fingers around the keys. And try as she might, Audrey could not release them.

Not quite so sure of herself now, Audrey asked what the keys were for and why they seemed to be getting hotter. With great kindness, Mr. Tanner explained that they were the keys for the theater. When she asked Mr. Tanner why he was giving the keys to her, he smiled and explained that now he also was free to leave the theater, and that she would need the keys. Again, Audrey asked why. Mr. Tanner explained that she would need the keys because she was now the theater's new manager. A series of explosions produced a cacophony of thoughts and events from earlier in the day, and they whipped about and flashed in her mind scaring her. The implications of what Mr. Tanner had said were staggering and terrifying.

As Jerry, Mr. Tanner, all of the other students and their teachers left the theater, the once bright and shiny interior of the theater slowly began a descent into a cold metallic darkness that chilled Audrey to her core. The great doors of the theater slammed shut splitting her ear drums, and all light vanished. Then the gigantic doors bolted themselves shut creating additional rounds of thunderous and deafening sounds. It was as if someone was pounding on gigantic kettle drums. The sound resonated throughout the entire theater. It came from above, below, right, left...ahead of her and behind her. The deafening sound had surrounded her. There was no place to hide, and there was no escape.

The sounds and vibrations shook Audrey so forcefully that she felt the marrow inside her bones liquefy. Her brain, eyes, shoulders and hips rattled around inside their bony sockets as if she were rolling up and down a series of jagged granite mountains and crashing into boulders that were strewn across the valleys. Her organs smashed and pummeled each other until she thought she would die. Death. Funny, she should think about that now. At first, she was terrified that she was going to die. Then, she was terrified that she wasn't. The deep reverberation echoed and re-echoed for a long, long time.

Now freezing and all alone in the totally black and silent theater, Audrey recalled seeing the bus, her friends and her teachers leaving without her. But, just for an instant before the great doors slammed shut cutting off any chance of escape, there was a tiny whiff of air, a minute puff, a small zephyr that lifted the veil of fog for just a moment, and in the mirrored glass windows of the bus Audrey saw the reflection of the towering marquee and the flashing lights spelling out those odd words...ENOZ THGILIWT EHT. Only this time, she could read them.